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Sara Devoe
SUNY Geneseo

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Sonya Bilocerkowycz's *On Our Way Home from the Revolution:* A Review

People have various identities. There is one's gender identity, cultural identity, ethnic identity, sexual identity, and so on. But what does it mean to take pride in one's identity? What defines one's identity? Is it understanding one's own roots? Is it participation in certain cultural events? Is it going to the Ukrainian restaurant in the East Village of Manhattan, or sacrificing relationships to fight in a revolution? In her collection of essays, *On Our Way Home from the Revolution*, Sonya Bilocerkowycz tackles these questions as she explores her identity as a Ukrainian American.

On Our Way Home From the Revolution is comprised of fifteen essays in which Bilocerkowycz pieces out where exactly she fits in the timeline of the Ukrainian Revolution. In doing this, her essays look at family relationships, culturally immersive experiences, and travel to show a changing sense of what it means to be Ukrainian. We are welcomed into Bilocerkowycz's Ukrainian heritage and invited to watch memories of her family (specifically her Busia, which is Ukrainian for grandmother) play out. Busia is a central figure throughout these essays; guiding Bilocerkowycz on her journey of self-discovery from afar. On their relationship, Bilocerkowycz says, "I don't know where Busia ends and

where I begin.” Bilocerkowycz travels to the Ukraine to teach English, where she experiences revolution firsthand.

Extensive research also informs this collection. For instance, “Word Portrait” is a document taken from police files which lists the characteristics of Bilocerkowycz’s grandfather, also known as prisoner No.XXXXXX, who was arrested for betrayal. Bilocerkowycz obtained this through emailing the Ukrainian archives about her grandfather. Other instances of research mixed with speculation are the multiperspectivity that lies in “Duck and Cover.” Bilocerkowycz imagines herself in the shoes of several different people. She imagines herself as Sasha, an eight-year-old student who was present at the time of the 2013 Chelyabinsk meteor. “*Duck and cover* is what your fourth-grade teacher screamed, but what she meant is this is war,” she would say to Sasha. Bilocerkowycz also puts herself in the shoes of Anna Politkovskaya, a Ukrainian journalist who was murdered in an elevator. Bilocerkowycz says, “Ten years later, when my grandmother dies, I will admire her crown of glory and think about where I came from.”

The essays stand alone, but together the effect is one, long story with intertwined characters and once central conflict—a search for identity. The interconnectedness we see between “The Village (Fugue),” “The Village (Reprise),” and “The Village (De Capo)” is a great example of this. All three stories follow Bilocerkowycz’s grandfather, and her journey of discovering his past actions. In “The Village (Fugue),” we are told by Busia about the village elder in the small Ukrainian village, who then becomes Bilocerkowycz’s grandfather who was aiding the Germans in “The Village (Reprise).” Despite what she learns about her grandfather, Bilocerkowycz does not let the facts erase what she feels for this country and her people. In “The Village (De Capo),” she tells the reader “...I am telling my daughter she may go to the revolution. Which means I am telling my granddaughter, too: Yes, of course, leave home and go.”

Bilocerkowycz’s use of vivid imagery makes the reader feel as though they are experiencing life alongside her. With just its title, “I Saw the Sunshine Melting” offers a both innocent and eerie way to describe the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. Bilocerkowycz mentions how many of the bus drivers, one including her great-uncle’s cousin whose name they don’t know, got out as evacuation was occurring and sunbathed, blissfully unaware of radiation poisoning. Readers would also be struck by the imagery in “Encyclopedia of Earthly Things,” a story that is written entirely about Bilocerkowycz’s affiliations with certain words—like the word “poppy,” which she describes as, “Petals of red paper, easily lost. Suggests virginity. The seeds are also like fish eggs.” Each word or object she describes comes along with a resonant image affiliated with her Busia, and although some are sweet, some are brutal, like

“A Sunflower Field,” which she describes as, “...a graveyard. It is a cemetery for Boeing plane parts.”

Though *On Our Way Home from the Revolution* is rich in history, it is not just a collection for history lovers. Unlike history books, Bilocerkowycz immerses readers in another’s life. We come to understand the emotional reckoning Bilocerkowycz has undergone. As much as this is a collection of essays about revolution, it is also about the yearning to discover one’s place in the world. As Bilocerkowycz asks, “Am I just a reflection of a reflection?” It is a collection for readers who desire to open themselves to harsh realities and see how those realities pave ways for new beginnings.